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Creating and Nurturing a Community of Practice for Language Teachers in Higher Education

Teresa MacKinnon¹

Abstract. This case study investigates the implementation of a virtual learning environment designed for language teachers for an institution-wide language programme in a UK higher education institution. This development has taken place over a 3 year period and included a pilot virtual learning environment for 300, followed by a full implementation to more than 3,000 users. It was informed at all stages by users, usage analysis and research into best practice for language teaching and learning. The users have complete ownership of the spaces and the tools they need to facilitate interaction and communication, allowing greater freedom to experiment with learning design. Social media are used to help tutors find their personal learning network. An empirical design methodology and the Community of Practice approach to implementation embeds continuing professional development (CPD) within a supportive and open community. This case study will provide a quantitative analysis of the activity in the portal over time. It will also draw on qualitative data using Steiner Kvale's (1996) "traveler metaphor" approach in order to reach conclusions about factors important to the use of technology in CPD. It points to the need for tutors to find relative advantage in the technologies they are given as their engagement is closely linked to that of their learners (Levy, 1997). It also highlights the opportunities presented to foster interest in and discussion of the theoretical aspects of subject specific learning design.

Keywords: community of practice, CPD, digital literacies, language teaching, HE, VLE, innovation.

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1. Introduction

The Language Centre at the University of Warwick is a long established support service delivering language learning opportunities to Warwick's student and staff population as well as to members of the public. Annually it supports about 3,500 students with approximately 50 teaching and support staff. Faced with the rapidly growing pressures in a competitive market, the Centre puts a strategic priority upon maintaining a delivery that is effective and meets consumer expectations for support beyond the classroom. We also aim to deliver research based innovation in language teaching. In recent years it has become clear that we need to prioritise the accessibility of our resources over the internet. Developments in our teaching have also included greater reliance on web based resources and some interest in digital affordances for innovation, e.g. voice over the internet and use of video. These concerns presented some important challenges:

- there was no institutional provision for a virtual learning environment such as Moodle or Blackboard;
- the available tools were not sustainable given our limited technical and training resources and did not meet the requirements for international language use, fundamental to our work;
- nor did they foster the development of transferable digital skills to support career development of our staff.

The case study reported here attempted to address the challenges detailed above in order to provide a basis for the digital skills development of our staff . It was decided that we would invest in a hosted moodle and integrate sustainable technologies, some of which were already in use, in order to offer flexible online areas to support tutor development of blended delivery.

An initial pilot study with a limited number of tutors and courses proved popular and so, with support from an Institutional Teaching and Learning review and Fellowship² funding through our Institute for Advanced Teaching and Learning, a full deployment of Languages@Warwick³ began in 2010.

2. http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/cross_fac/iatl/funding/fundedprojects/fellowships/mackinnon2/

3. <http://m2.warwicklanguage.org.uk/>

2. Method

The approach used draws upon Wenger's (2000) Community of Practice model, which identifies three elements that define a Community of Practice:

- the domain – all members are committed to the same domain, in this case teaching languages to non specialist students;
- the community – members interact with each other and learn together;
- the practice – the members engage in sustained interaction which results in a shared repertoire.

Additionally, it was recognised that tutor confidence is an important factor in the effective use of technologies for teaching (Levy, 1997) and so the approach adopted prioritised ownership, autonomy and sharing. At the outset, all tutors were enrolled as students in a course area called “Using moodle for language teaching” (101), in order to explore the pedagogical aspects of course design and easily locate useful resources including a staff user guide⁴, video tutorials⁵ and a quick tool guide⁶. Staff also had access to shared sandbox areas for testing.

A mixed methods approach was used to evaluate the project and establish its effectiveness in fostering tutor confidence and engagement in blended delivery. Every year quantitative usage data⁷ has been collected in order to inform developments and we knew that engagement in Languages@Warwick by both students and staff was growing (Table 1).

Table 1. Growth in user base

Growth of Languages@Warwick	December 2011	July 2013
number of users	2127	3491
number of courses	105	182

For this evaluation, quantitative data used included usage patterns of the 101 course over the three years and student satisfaction scores from 2013. Student

4. <http://www.scribd.com/doc/125351686/Languagesv5>

5. <https://www.youtube.com/user/warwicklanguage>

6. <http://www.slideshare.net/teresamac/moodle2-toolguideforteachers-v11tm>

7. <http://www.slideshare.net/teresamac/languages-warwick>

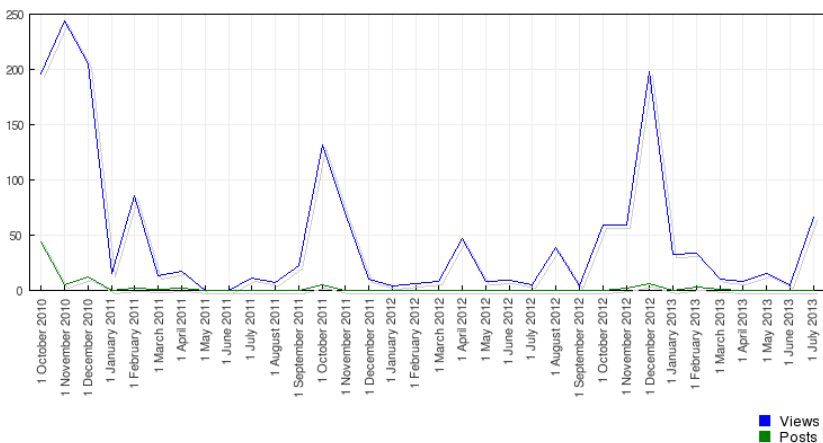
feedback responses were used as an indicator of how course design principles were being applied.

Qualitative data was elicited from a small purposive sample of tutors in order to collect their reflections on the Community of Practice approach we had adopted. The sample was selected on the basis that they had been using technology for language teaching in our context prior to the launch of Languages@Warwick. The data was collected via an anonymous Google form sent by email to each participant. The short questionnaire⁸ asked for reflection upon their use of technology before and after the deployment of Languages@Warwick. The data was then analysed as a “Bildungsreise” (Kvale, 1996) in order to reveal further research questions for closer investigation.

3. Data analysis

The 101 course usage showed spikes of activity at certain times of each year (Figure 1). During the first year (Oct 2010-May 2011) the course ran as a time-released course and started with lots of interest, mainly views rather than active participation. However, during that year only a small cohort of staff were using a Languages@Warwick course for their students. During the ensuing years the course content was managed as a set of topics and the forum was used as a way of transmitting information to site users.

Figure 1. 101 course usage



8. https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1fYFeWsxqzSY5IT28eL7DhWhNAbwZ_U3vSgM9NuiZYw/viewform

Examined in more detail it is clear that the increased views are linked to the timings of our face-to-face sharing sessions where staff showed what they had been doing in their online courses. Other smaller spikes also follow forum messages. These patterns are to be expected. They show our staff behaving as many students do, reactively attending to the messages they are sent by the tutor and using the course resources to follow up on relevant items of interest which have been brought to their attention in a “classroom” setting. However, the lack of posting indicates that the Community of Practice is not residing within this course. Looking more broadly at staff interactions outside the course, it was interesting to see that most of the questions arising out of the 101 course came through e-mail and face-to-face questions as staff were less comfortable posting “publically” on the course forum. It was clear that there was also a lack of understanding of moodle messaging settings. Staff often replied to forum posts thinking they were personal emails. These trends were visible during the past 2 years and interventions were put in place to increase staff awareness of messaging settings and encourage the formation of personal learning networks (PLN) relative to activities of interest such as voice tools and more recently video usage. The aim was to disrupt the expectation that learning could only happen as a result of the course tutor’s actions and encourage ownership of skills development. This realisation is significant if tutors are to transfer control to learners and increase autonomy (Tumposky, 1982, p. 5; Vandergrift, 2008, p. 90). The role of the 101 course is as a central point of contact and the emerging Communities of Practice (e.g. teachers using voice tools) are satellites around it.

Using the student satisfaction data it was clear that tutors were able to manage their courses by 2012-13 in a way which was judged broadly satisfactory by students. On average 84.9% of students on courses rated the use of Languages@Warwick as satisfactory or better. Courses with a wider variety of activities including use of the interactive features available such as voice boards and quizzes showed greater levels of student satisfaction as illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2. Student satisfaction levels

Activities	Course A 91% scored 3 or above	Course B 27% scored 3 or above
assignments	17	10
fora	2	1
quizzes	3	0
resources	118	20
voice boards	5	0
voice podcasts	4	0

The results are not unexpected but are worthy of bringing to the attention of the emerging Community of Practice.

The qualitative survey⁹ contributed insights from a small cohort of tutors interested in technology enhanced learning. All respondents said that since they have been using the site their technical skills have improved. Their range of strategies for finding help was broad; all had accessed tutorial videos and asked colleagues for help, but there was evidence of using a wide range of support networks both internal and external and experimentation in sandbox areas. There was unanimous agreement that the following factors impacted positively on their technology usage: ease of use, positive feedback from students, re-usability of resources and a perception of professional development. For this group of tutors these factors contributed to the relative advantage they had found in using Languages@Warwick.

The qualitative responses indicate an awareness of an emerging Community of Practice from one participant:

“I showed colleagues how to upload documents to Forum and to each week, how to create activities, e.g. assignment... I remember better in showing them how to do those tasks”.

Another, reflecting on the face-to-face sessions:

“Colleagues demonstrated how to make quizzes and how to upload videos. I remembered them because I could use them straight away in my design of online courses, and they are very practical and quite easy to implement. The sharing has been useful and did prompt me to try a new technology in my teaching”.

This feedback shows tutors taking ownership of their skills development and nurturing their colleagues’ skills, whilst at the same time fostering the conditions for discussions about learning design. They are the technology champions whose skills feed the development of the wider Community of Practice, they also share their learning beyond our local context with their language associations.

4. Conclusions

It is widely acknowledged in the literature of CALL that tutors struggle with the transfer and application of technology use to their teaching situation (Hegelheimer et al., 2004; Peters, 2006). The tutor champions in our context provide scaffolding

9. A summary of responses can be seen at https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1fYFeWxsaqzSY5IT28eL7DhWhNAbwZ_U3vSgM9NUiZYw/viewanalytics#start=publishanalytics

in support of Lave and Wenger's (1991) notion of the "cognitive apprenticeship" offering practical examples of how the tools can fit the teaching tasks. The 101 course (Figure 2) signposts the theory and professional resources.

Figure 2. 101 course screenshot



The approach allows for situated learning whereby collaboration between novice and expert users of technology for learning co-operate in relevant, task based contexts, facilitating the transfer process. Shared participation in problem solving and negotiation of meaning allow for discussion of learning design. However, this is not a rapid development solution. Growth takes place in an organic way and the Community has to be "tended" to in order to ensure that timely interventions are available to support the expansion of the Community. The 101 course is built on the assumption that our tutors identify with a shared domain of practice, that of "language tutors who use technology". The extent to which this is true will vary and could be investigated more closely but our champions will play a key role in convincing others that belonging to this domain is to their advantage. It would appear that we should continue to investigate our progress and provide focused interventions in order to nurture an enterprise which is bringing positive impact to our teaching and learning.

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Appendices

Further data produced as part of this investigation can be accessed here: <http://www.scribd.com/doc/172819468/Appendices-for-Eurocall-2013-Paper>